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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SANTO DOMINGO 000794

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR WHA, DRL, AND CA
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [ASEC](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: DOMINICAN WORK STOPPAGE, JAN 28-29: FEW GAINS

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 537

Classified By: Economic & Political Counselor Michael Meigs. Reason: 1
.5 (b) and (d).

[11.](#) (SBU) Summary: The Dominican Republic has returned to normal after a January 28-29 national work stoppage by labor and community groups and small leftist parties. The stoppage was successful for the opposition in gaining widespread Dominican support and successful for the government in that violence was limited to eight dead in only scattered, isolated confrontations. Many were arrested before or during the stoppage and detained for its duration; most have been released. Some human rights abuses occurred. The message is that Dominicans are glumly unhappy about deteriorating economic conditions. The rising tempo of presidential election campaign activities should distract discontented citizens and encourage them to make their opinions known via the ballot box. End summary.

[12.](#) (SBU) Productive activity and traffic returned to normal in the Dominican Republic January 30 after a two-day national work stoppage, in which most businesses and offices closed as most employees and customers stayed home. The ad hoc "Coordination of Popular, Labor, and Transport Worker Organizations" declared the "huelga" a success in marking discontent with depressed economic conditions and the government's policies. The small panel of spokespersons told the media they would maintain a set of (unrealistic) demands, such as the immediate doubling of salaries. President Mejia commented, "We all lose" from such actions, especially the neediest, because of the lost earnings.

Confrontations

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[13.](#) (SBU) The empty streets spoke more about citizen discontent than about organized resistance. No marches or organized demonstrations occurred (in contrast to the enthusiastic parades on January 26 for the PLD and late January 27 for the victory of Santo Domingo's baseball team Licey in the national series.) In sporadic, uncoordinated actions in low-income neighborhoods of the capital and in towns in the eastern half of the country protestors burned tires, threw rocks, broke windows and set off homemade explosives. Shots were fired. The scattered violence petered out by the afternoon of January 30. When heavily armed patrols of military personnel and police responded to protests, violent confrontations left casualties. The National Police tell us 8 persons were killed (including one policeman) and 212 wounded. Military intelligence say some shooting was provoked by local drug traffickers. A National Police tally on January 30 included a breakdown of casualties by location: 6 dead (3 in the north, 2 in the southeast, and 1 in the capital) and 43 injured (33 in the north, 5 in the capital, 4 in the southwest, and 1 in the southeast). By comparison, the one-day national work stoppage on November 11 left 8 dead.

Arrests

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[14.](#) (C) Police reported that 325 persons had been detained during the two-day stoppage, mostly protesters involved in or on the margins of civil disturbances. Military intelligence say some "huelga" organizers had been rounded up for questioning, but said they had all been released January 29 and claimed the arrests had been carried out with a judicial warrant. The military acknowledged that some human rights had been infringed, but provided no details. President Mejia told the Ambassador on February 5 that 1500 arrests had been made in order to forestall violence. According to the police, all the detainees but 7 had been released as of February 5, and it was possible the 7 might be released February 6.

Human Rights Abuses

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15. (SBU) The spouse of labor leader Ramon Perez Figuereo, an organizer of the "huelga," said on local television January 28 that police had searched her house and sought to detain her husband without a warrant -- a practice forbidden under reformed procedural guidelines adopted by the justice system in 2003. Embassy staff report that in some cases police disregarded the constitutional right to the inviolability of the home unless judicial formalities have been complied with, the right to freedom of circulation, and the legal requirement for arrest warrants.

Organizers' Demands

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16. (SBU) The political message was that many Dominicans are fed up with the current economic problems and government. Most people just stayed home from work. Opposition politicians, church leaders, and some mainline business organizations and labor unions expressed sympathy or support for the work stoppage, but there were no organized demonstrations to air grievances or advocate policy changes. Some "huelga" organizers individually put forward radical demands of their own without gathering any mainline support. Among their calls were that the Dominican Republic not sign its pending IMF agreement or a free trade agreement with the United States; that prices of basic necessities and the dollar exchange rate be reduced by fiat; that wages be doubled; and that President Mejia resign.

17. (SBU) The government and media commentators dismissed such demands and President Mejia rejected the demands as "blackmail." The only group that might gain something is health workers, who staged a one-day advance strike at public hospitals January 27 demanding higher salaries and more equipment and supplies. President Mejia agreed that a health workers' advocacy group could form a committee to suggest legislation to finance higher levels of health spending.

Participating Groups

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18. (SBU) The umbrella "Coordination Council" member organizations included the relatively obscure "Collective of Popular Organizations," "Council of Popular Unity," "Coordinator for Unity and Struggle," and "Broad Front of Popular Struggle" (FALPO) led by Fidel Santana, "Committee for Defense of Barrio Rights," "National Coordinator of Peasant Women," and the National Confederation of Unified Transport Workers (CNTU) led by Ramon Perez Figuereo. There were small leftist parties including the "Force of the Revolution" of Narciso Isa Conde, "New Alternative" of Ramon Almanzar, the Independent Movement for Unity and Change (MIUCA) of Virtudes Alvarez, the Communist Labor Party (PCT) of Manuel Salazar, the Patriotic Union (UPA) of Hector Sanchez, the Party of Dominican Workers (PTD) of Ivan Rodriguez, and the Force of Labor (Fuerza del Trabajo) of Jose Adon. And there were community groups such as the "Committee of Popular Action of Capotillo," a low-income barrio in Santo Domingo; the Dominican Association of Teachers; and student and youth groups.

Economic Cost

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19. (SBU) Economic losses from the work stoppage are difficult to estimate, but were probably significant for a country that was already in an economic slump and serious financial difficulty. The night before, President Mejia told the nation on television that lost production would total RD 3 billion (about 60 million dollars). No one publicly challenged that figure.

More Work Stoppages?

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110. (SBU) This action, like the November one, was carefully timed for a week including a national holiday (Monday was the national celebration of independence figure Duarte). The "huelga" organizers announced follow-up meetings of the groups that supported the "huelga," on February 7, 15, and 26, to assess results and discuss future protests. A military intelligence contact expects future actions to vent discontent with the economic situation.

Comment

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111. (SBU) One success, whether due to popular indifference or to actions of the security forces, was the limitation of violence. Dominican history has included far worse episodes, particularly in the 1990s. Perhaps the principal cost was the marked further deterioration of the country's image abroad. In newspapers across the United States and in Europe, press accounts of deaths and wire service photos of armed police in action provided a handy lead for stories on

economic problems, downgrades by the credit rating firms, and the noisy partisan disarray of the presidential election campaign. The tourism sector has so far been largely immune. However, the leading hotel development group now markets its destination as "Punta Cana" without mention of "the Dominican Republic."

12. (SBU) The rising tempo of election campaign activities, driven by intense local political loyalties, will provide alternative opportunities for Dominicans to channel their frustrations and push for solutions via the ballot box. The coalition of strike organizers may put another stoppage on the calendar, but if so, it is likely to be overshadowed by the campaigns.

HERTELL